

Civil and Uncivil Disobedience
(Expository Writing 20, Section 228)
Fall 2021

Classroom: TBA

Meeting Times: Mondays and Wednesdays, 12-1:15pm

Course Website: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/91939>

Ben Roth

broth@fas.harvard.edu

Office: 1 Bow Street, #237

Office Hours: in person, TBA, as well as quicker questions before and after class;
on Zoom by appointment.

Course Description: Recent years have seen a renewal of protest in the United States: against racism, police brutality, inaction on climate change, and much more. Notably new is the way in which conservatives have taken up the banner of resistance: a county clerk in Kentucky refused to sign marriage certificates for same-sex couples, huge numbers of people have rejected public health mandates, and many have retroactively described the events of January 6 at the Capitol in minimizing or even positive terms. When, if ever, is it justifiable to break the law for moral reasons? How can we fairly assess acts of civil disobedience by those of different political views? If you think you can ignore a law simply because you disagree with it, you are inviting others to ignore even laws you think are essential when they disagree with them.

To begin the course we will read influential selections, spanning the political spectrum, from thinkers such as Plato (the “Crito”), Kant (“What Is Enlightenment?”), Gandhi (from *Hind Swaraj*), and John Rawls (from *A Theory of Justice*) about these questions and their intertwinement with issues of free speech, non-violence, and our obligations in society. These texts are dense with claims and arguments, but not difficult to read. We will think about how to isolate one line of reasoning to analyze in your first papers, which will both be and focus on pieces of argument-based writing.

Next, we will turn to a number of concrete historical cases: Thoreau, who was jailed for refusing to pay his poll tax out of protest against slavery and imperialism (“Civil Disobedience”); Hannah Arendt’s coverage of the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the main architects of the Holocaust, who defended his actions by claiming that his obedience, a virtue, had been taken advantage of by his superiors (*Eichmann in Jerusalem*); and Martin Luther King’s and Malcolm X’s different visions of the struggle for civil rights (“Letter from Birmingham Jail” and “The Ballot or the Bullet”). Students will write a paper putting one of these examples in conversation with a bit of theory, testing its claims, or using them to deepen their analysis.

Finally, at the end of the course, we will consider selections from a range of different approaches and methodologies about whether uncivil or even violent resistance is ever justifiable. These will likely include work by Kennedy School political scientist Erica Chenoweth, local philosopher Candice Delmas, Ijeoma Oluo on protests by football players, and selections from the book that grew out Vicky Osterweil’s controversial post-Ferguson essay [“In Defense of Looting.”](#) Students will develop final research topics of their choosing, which might examine a philosophical argument, a particular protest movement or action (historical or recent), or a film or other work of art about civil disobedience.